

Barton Field

By Pedro Vera



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After you spend more than a year in the military, you start noticing how regardless of where you are at, everything seems to be so uniform and generic that you have a hard time figuring out exactly where you are. Move from base to base within the continental US and you would not know which one is it except for some few distinct hints. In Fort Jackson we had the old headquarters building, and

there was a very peculiar water tower. In Fort Gordon we had the Signal Towers and of course, Barton Field.

Barton Field is the official name of the parade grounds. Imagine the National Mall but in a slightly smaller scale. Just like the mall, there is a road that goes around it, and a few roads that dissect it.

Depending on which road you took, you could run up to 4 miles around it.

To us Barton Field was sort of a DMZ. We did our PT there. We ran around it a lot. The track was a mix of loose clay and sand, which plays hell on your knees and chins. Thee same clay and sand screw up your lungs during dry days.

During the summer we always had parades. Mind that this is Georgia, so people would drop like flies due to heat exhaustion. It was so bad that we never put out a parade formation with 100% of the troops. Instead we kept a few platoons as reserve, sort of hidden in the tree line as far away from the review stands as possible. These platoons kept water buffaloes so we could rotate the troops and get them hydrated. If a soldier fainted, the two soldiers at either side would carry him to the three line. Three fresh soldiers from the reserve platoon would then race back to replace them.

I thought I was pretty well used to the heat. After all, I lived in a tropical island for 21 years. I was quickly allowed to change my mind about that subject while I was still in the reception battalion. Following directions I was drinking about 10 full canteens of water a day. My first night at reception I woke up at 2 AM and threw up about half of that water. A few weeks later, during a parade practice, the guys caught me maybe 15 seconds before I fainted. All I can remember is they took off my Kevlar helmet and started pouring water over my head.

In our hottest parade at Barton Field, it was so miserable that I had already known I would faint, but it just wouldn't come! I thought screw this, I am going to throw myself in the floor.

Small problem: for this to be credible I would need to drop like a rock. If I fell forward I was bound to break my nose. If I fell backwards I could hit my head with something. All I had to do was lock my knees and that would guarantee that I would faint for real within a minute.

Not really worth it.

Right as I was ready to drop forward, the guy to my right fainted.

Bingo. I grabbed under his left shoulder and with the guy at his other side I carried him back to the tree line and managed to spend the rest of the parade sitting under the shade (we were casualties, so we were not expected to come back to troop the parade).

Still, we only did a few parades every year, so it was not such a big source for misery. What really made us hate it was the running.

When you are running in clay and sand and trying to keep step in a formation that has over 200 people, the pace slows down into something called the "airborne shuffle." This is great for the weak runners, but it plays hell on your legs because you are literally stomping the ground as you run. If you have good lungs you have no choice but to run *around* the formation. So there you have 200+ people running in-step, and a few guys sprinting around them. Some even take turns holding the company guidon¹ to run around, so on top of running around people that are already running, they are carrying a long staff with a small flag. If everybody else ran 3 miles you probably ran 4 or more.

Sometimes people would fuck around and that drove the drill sergeants crazy. This meant that instead of taking the cross-road that would let us do a 3-mile run, we were

¹ The unit flag, flying off a wooden staff.

told to keep running. Miss another of these roads and your run is already 4 miles.

If they got really mad, they would make us get off the clay and sand track and run in the paved 1/4-mile running track. Clever bastards that they were, the drill sergeants would keep us running around the 1/4 mile track until we lost count of the laps. Once everybody was dragging ass then we were allowed to complete the main 4-mile loop.

Every once in a while they would be in a specially sadistic mood. They would make us hit the road and head to the remote parts of the base. Here you had some relief: road guard duty. If you were picked (or volunteered) as a road guard, you were handed an orange reflecting vest. Your job was then to run either in front or behind the formation, not bothering with keeping step, and make sure all roads were blocked. Being a road guard meant a lot of sprints but it was better than being stuck inside of the formation.

There was a remote area that had a paved cross-country track. It did not allow formation running since it was too narrow, so we would be broken down into squads and sent down the trail one squad at a time. The terrain was hilly and very pretty, but you were too concerned on your chest and legs to have time to look at the pretty scenery.

Somebody had figured that problem already, so a few enterprising soldiers before our time decided to take the matter into their own hands. What they did was spray into the pavement some messages designed to inspire you to keep running.

This they did with a perverse sense of humor.

For example, you would be running uphill and there would be an outline of a dead man painted on the floor (imagine the outline you see on the floor in murder movies). These outlines would have red marks in their knees, chins, lungs, etc. The outlines also had stuff written:

"You can't do it."

"Walk back home, you are not worth it."

"My chest hurts."

That kind of thing. It was novel enough that it kept us distracted and the hilly section of the road became almost enjoyable.

We also used Barton Field for what we called "muscle failure" exercises. The purpose of these exercises was to build muscle strength by wearing our asses off. We called them muscle failure because we would keep working out until we would just collapse. For example, if doing push-ups, you

would get to the point in which you could not do even one more push-up.

We also had cardio workouts, which were just like muscle failure but in addition to making your muscles hurt like hell, your lungs took a beating too. A fact that is little known outside of military circles is that push-ups as an on-the-spot punishment are worthless after more than a month or so of continuous training. The trainee develops enough muscle strength so the push-ups end up becoming a novelty.

Not the case with cardio exercises. Regardless of how fit you are, there is always one particular exercise that will quickly bring the pain into your life. Take a drive around Fort Gordon and you will quickly find out the recruits that are short term, say, less than 12 weeks total training, and the ones that are spending a whole year training. The short-term recruits will be doing push-ups while the long term recruits will be doing locomotives, side-straddle hops² and cannon cockers.

Everybody used Barton Field for PT. Because of this the half of the field that was used for training (the

² The side-straddle hop is almost identical to a jumping jack. The jumping jack was outlawed while I was in Fort Gordon, sometime between 1992 and 1994. It was outlawed due to the potential for shoulder injuries. The side-straddle hop minimizes the upper movements of the arms in the exercise, so it had a lower injury rate.

section closer to the old headquarters building was unofficially reserved for parades and that kind of thing) was sliced into battalion areas. Each battalion area had one "PT stand" per company. The PT stand was a tall wooden platform, barely big enough for two adults to stand and work out. The idea here was that the person leading a company for the PT could be seen from anywhere in the formation.

Each PT stand had stenciled the company and battalion it belonged to.

Since the Army fosters something akin to sibling rivalry between units, we were always looking for a way to piss off the guys from other companies. One day we would send runners to join some other company's running formation. After 5 minutes or so our runners would start running around the formation until they could snatch their company guidon.

This is a very bad thing.

Well, for the people that let *their* flag get stolen. Our guys would end up paying for the insult with a few push-ups, but what the hell. It was always funny to see two guys running like the hammers of hell with a stolen flag and 250 pissed off guys intent on recovering it.

The other guys of course retaliated. One day we marched to Barton Field to our company area and found our PT stand was nowhere to be found. It took two hours to find it about a mile away! Some unknown party (which we all knew was comprised 100% of members of the stolen flag company) dragged it thru Barton Field for almost a mile.

It was understood that we were even. We stole their flag, they put our PT stand on TDY³. We said sure.

Two weeks later *their* PT stand mysteriously caught fire, and to this date nobody knows who did it. Not really good, since up to that incident there was never a real property damage.

This also created other unexpected problems. Barton Field was officially off-limits from dusk until dawn. The Military Police was willing to look the other way as long as we only crossed it as a shortcut from the barracks to the Post Exchange (PX) complex. Now because of these yet-unknown idiots the MP had no choice but to start random patrols of the field to try to catch people crossing thru it during dark hours.

This was seriously annoying to us. We could walk from the barracks to the PX almost as fast as what it took to

³ Temporary Duty. TDY orders put you to work at a different unit but at the end of the duty you return to your permanent unit.

take one of the beat-up gypsy cabs that offered \$1 rides anywhere on post.

One night after that incident we decided to hell with it, we need to go bowling. We went to the bowling alley just off the PX and goofed off for a couple hours. I don't even think any of the guys drank more than a beer that night. During the last half hour we spent there a couple more guys came from nowhere and sort of stuck with us.

Eventually we made it out of the bowling alley and walked across Barton Field to the side of the base with all the training brigades. The drill was to start walking across each battalion, dropping one guy here and there. By the time we made it to the 447th Signals Battalion there would be maybe two or three of us left.

Each battalion area was comprised of a few two-story buildings used as barracks, plus a long single-story brick building divided into four big sections for each of the four major segments of the headquarters for each battalion: S1 (Administration), S2 (Intelligence), S3 (Operations) and S4 (Supply). This is the building where you went to straighten your personnel records, pay, exchange soiled bed linen, etc. The way the buildings were arranged they enclosed some areas, like a courtyard of sorts. These areas usually held gazebos, which also acted as the only

sanctioned smoking areas, and basketball courts. The basketball courts were used as formation areas. The 447th Signals was so big that we had three basketball courts in a huge expanse of concrete between the buildings. It was big enough to hold the whole battalion in close formation.

As we made our way thru the battalions we stopped in the gazebos to say hi to whomever was still there (obviously trying to suck on one last cigarette for the night) and then we dropped one or two guys and kept moving. On our second stop we were sitting in one of the gazebos that belonged to my first signals unit, the 360th Signals Battalion. The 360th got disbanded and we were sent to the 447th many months before but I still missed the 360 because they had the best-maintained barracks in the trainee side of the base. Their smoking area and the gazebos with their picnic tables were pretty enough to be used in a home improvement magazine article.

We were sitting in the dark, minding our own business, when out of nowhere people started running, many of them with flash lights. A pair of MP's came to me and asked me to identify the guys and myself. I was already a specialist and also was the platoon leader, so at least the MP's did not treat me like I was retarded. We already knew there was no point in trying to bullshit the Military Police, so I

told them exactly what we did: we crossed over to the PX, got bored, bowled, then walked back and started dropping the guys at their respective barracks.

The MP was satisfied with my explanation, but then at the same time both him and one of the other soldiers with the flashlights lit up one of the two guys that joined us at the bowling alley at the last moment.

"Lookie here, see who we found?"

The MP's grabbed both guys, cuffed them, frisked them and hauled them away. Just like that. And not a word to us, they just arrested them.

We said fuck this, time to go home, so we hurried back to the 447th, where there was an unusual amount of people hanging out in front of the building. It only took us two minutes to figure out what happened:

One of the two late arrivals had gone drinking with a female recruit. They got frisky and went to her barracks room (off-limits to males) to have consensual sex. After the act was completed the female got clingy and the male tried to leave her. The female got mad and reported that he raped her. While we were bowling there was a small manhunt going thru the whole base looking for the suspected rapist and his buddy.

We got a few brownie points because we actually got to see the arrest.

We never saw the guy again. I did.

Months later I flew back to Puerto Rico to visit my fiancée (and to get on my knees and hand her an engagement ring) and while I was around my old college town I decided to go take a look at the new Army recruiting station, which was now right in front of my old digs. The old recruiting station was about 10 miles away.

Not five minutes after I walk into the recruiting station, I run into the suspected rapist. He found a bullshit excuse to get out of the Army and as soon as he saw me he pulled me aside and tried to convince me to lie about what happened in Georgia. Obviously his buddies the recruiters did not know the real reason why he was out of the Army.

I don't remember the exact words of how I threatened him if he ever dared to speak to me again, but whatever it was worked because I did not see him again.

The End

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